

US study reveals poor voters more likely to have ballots discarded

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An official study of the votes in 40 US Congressional districts in the 2000 election has found that an estimated 1.9 percent of the ballots cast in the presidential contest were not counted. The statistics reveal that the great majority of the disenfranchised voters came from working class and minority areas of the country.

The inquiry, triggered by the election debacle in Florida that ended with Republican candidate George W. Bush awarded the state's 25 electoral votes on the basis of a 537-vote popular vote margin, was entitled "Income and Racial Disparities in the Undercount in the 2000 Presidential Election." Carried out at the request of the Democratic members of the House Committee on Government Reform, it demonstrates that some of the procedures which effectively restricted voting rights in Florida are in operation across the entire country.

The report is the first analysis of the 2000 presidential election that studies the entire national vote. It is based on nearly 10 percent of the 435 Congressional districts nationwide. The 40 districts studied come from 20 different states. Twenty are "low-income, high minority" districts, and the other 20 are "affluent, low-minority" districts. Instead of focusing on countywide totals, which can obscure wide differences within large counties such as Los Angeles or Chicago's Cook County, the inquiry analyzed Congressional districts, mandated by law to contain equal populations.

The Congressional Research Service identified 64 "majority minority" districts in the US, where more than half of the population is black or Hispanic. The 20 selected for analysis were those with the highest percentage living in poverty. The low-minority districts chosen were those with the highest median household income according to 1990 census data.

Within these districts, the study looked at the influence of different voting machinery on the rate of uncounted ballots. Six kinds of voting equipment were used in these districts—punch-card machines, lever machines, paper ballots, electronic systems and optical scan machines used either in the precinct polling place or at a central location.

The findings of the study were summarized in several major conclusions. First, poor and minority voters were more than three times as likely as wealthy ones to have their ballots discarded. The 20 districts with high rates of poverty had a 4 percent ballot rejection rate, compared to only 1.2 percent in the wealthy districts.

In some cases the rate of rejection was 20 times greater in the poor districts. The 1st District of Illinois and the 17th District of Florida had an undercount rate of 7.9 percent—nearly 1 out of every 12 ballots cast were not counted. In six other widely separated poorer districts—in Florida, Illinois, South Carolina, New York, North Carolina and Georgia—the discard rate was more than 5 percent. Every one of the ten districts with the highest percentage of uncounted ballots had a high poverty rate and a high minority population. Ten of the 40 districts studied had less than 1 percent of ballots uncounted. Eight of these were wealthy districts. Only four of the richer districts had an undercount rate of more than 1 percent.

Voters in poorer districts where newer technologies such as electronic voting systems and precinct-based optiscan machines were used had a far lower rate of discarded ballots than those who used systems like punch-card and lever machines. The undercount rate was 7.7 percent on punch-card machines like the ones which played a prominent role in the outcome of the Florida vote. On lever machines the rate was 4.5 percent, on electronic voting systems 2.4 percent, and

when optical scanning machines were used on the precinct level the undercount rate was only 1.1 percent. Two of the districts with very low undercount rates, the 7th District in Alabama and the 2nd in Louisiana, were low-income districts that used either electronic voting equipment or optical scanning machines.

The study showed that when newer technology was used the disparity in the undercount rate between the poorer and richer districts was far smaller, dropping to only 0.6 percentage points in the case of precinct-counted optiscan machines. This finding indicated that faulty or outdated machinery played a far greater role in the failure to count ballots than voter error.

This latest report on the 2000 election has provoked relatively little comment in the media and political circles. Representative Henry Waxman of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee, called the disparities “an outrage.” “I think when people see this report, Democrats and Republicans alike, they’ll want to do something,” said Waxman. “We hope. It’s a national problem.”

Waxman’s “hope” notwithstanding, the historical record shows that very little in the way of genuine reform can be expected without the independent struggle of the working class. This is a system in which a population of more than half a million in the nation’s capital is still denied full voting rights. In the colonial outpost of Puerto Rico, its residents, who are citizens of the US, are likewise denied full voting rights. Nor has the Congress seen fit to enact the most elementary measures, such as speedy and easy voter registration and making Election Day a national holiday.

Some Democrats can be expected to wage half-hearted efforts to reform the voting machinery in the coming months, but it will not be high on their agenda. The opponents of these reforms will not have much difficulty in stalling such measures, or ensuring that the final legislative product does not address the fundamental issues raised by the hijacking of the election in Florida last year.

There is another aspect of the Congressional study which has received almost no attention. The 20 “low-income, high-minority” districts studied had a total number of 3,469,146 ballots cast. The 20 “affluent, low-minority” districts, with an equal population, had 5,775,679 ballots cast. This is a difference of more than 2 million. The alienation of the working class and large

sections of the middle translates into tens of millions of votes that are not cast, in addition to the 2 million or so that the study shows are cast but are not counted. The abstention rate, like the undercount rate, is not uniform across the country. It is concentrated in the poor, working class and minority areas. Where 60 to 65 percent cast ballots in middle class and wealthy areas, 30 percent or less do so in poor urban and rural areas.

Whatever the intentions of the big business politicians, the latest Congressional study does illustrate the increasingly hollow character of democratic rights in the US, including voting rights for which generations have fought, most recently in the civil rights struggles of less than 40 years ago.



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